

SUMMARY

The 'Education and young adults in Nordic rural areas' (EDYNORA) research project shows how higher-education provision in non-metropolitan and rural areas can strengthen youth retention and support rural and regional development. Using surveys of over 5 000 young adults, data analysis, and six Nordic case studies, the research identifies key enablers and challenges for the long-term success of higher-education institutions and offers lessons and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners at national, regional, and local levels.



CONTEXT

Education ranks among the top factors in migration decisions among young adults, so when local access is weak, regions risk youth out-migration. Despite rural population decline, sparse settlement, and shifting skills needs, providing education outside major urban areas remains essential to meet local labour demands, reduce social inequalities and enhance place attractiveness.

Smaller rural campuses often appeal to 'non-traditional' students – often older, balancing work or family, and valuing proximity to home. While digitalisation has improved access to education, physical campuses remain vital for peer interaction, well-being, and recruitment.

However, centralised governance structures and rigid national funding models restrict institutional flexibility, making it difficult to launch new or niche programmes. These challenges underline the need for approaches that keep education close to home and aligned with local labour markets.

Themes: Research and innovation, education and training, youth

Countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden

Organisation: Nordregio

Start & end date: 11/2023 - 08/2025

Budget: EUR 182 400

Funding sources: Nordic Council of Ministers

Website:

<https://nordregio.org/research/education-and-young-adults-in-nordic-rural-areas-edynora/>

Contact: Anna Berlina, research consultant, Nordregio,
anna.berlina@nordregio.org



OBJECTIVES

- > Explore the role of higher education outside major cities in **supporting youth retention** and regional development;
- > Map out individuals served by these campuses and **drivers** of study choices;
- > Identify practical ways to **align programmes with local jobs** and improve access and student experience;
- > Provide clear **evidence and recommendations** to support institutional and policy decision-making.





ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

The Nordregio research institute has combined academic literature review, data collection, in-depth case studies, focus group interviews and survey evidence to show how higher education outside big cities can support youth retention and regional development.

Nordic Higher Education and VET Portal: between 2023 and 2025, the project collected data on higher vocational education and training (VET) and higher education institutions and campuses in the Nordic countries to understand distribution, size and profiles.

Through this data, the team developed an [interactive portal](#) that reveals, for each campus or institution, the location, programme types, field of education, student numbers and year of establishment (where available). Additionally, it supports planning, reveals territorial gaps, enables cross-regional cooperation and strengthens transparency.

Survey evidence: in 2024, EDYNORA collaborated with the Nordic Early Career Mobility project survey (more than 5 000 respondents) to explore the factors that influence educational choices and migration among young people aged 25–39 in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Six case studies: Holbæk (DK), Åland UAS (AX), Campus Jakobstad (FI), Akureyri (IS), Nesna campus at Nord University (NO), Sundsvall campus at Mid Sweden University (SE) were studied through interviews to examine governance, delivery formats, student life, links to local labour markets, as well as key success factors and challenges.



RESULTS

- > **Proximity is decisive:** on average 38% of young adults prioritise studying close to home (FI 49%, NO 45%, DK 36%). In Iceland, 'only place with the desired programme' comes first (43%). Among those who actually studied at peripheral campuses, 53% prioritised proximity (vs 38% overall), confirming that local access matters most for these students.
- > **Campus still matters:** hybrid delivery widens access, but a real campus remains key for peer interaction, well-being and retention; poorly designed hybrid models can weaken campus life. Practical enablers include 24/7 access and locally anchored support services.
- > **Match programmes to local jobs and students with employers:** structured employer links – internships, project courses, advisory boards – improve recruitment and keep graduates local. Short courses/micro-credentials help respond to fast-changing skills needs.
- > **Student life and housing shape outcomes:** affordable housing and a purposeful small-campus community raise retention, while fluctuating cohorts make it harder to plan housing and sustain vibrant campus life.
- > **Governance and funding matter:** limited local autonomy, one-size-fits-all funding and shifting political priorities constrain small campuses. Impact improves with stable, long-term support, place-sensitive regulations, and evaluation that values more than research outputs – such as reducing social inequalities, enhancing quality of life, and strengthening regional identity.
- > **Recognise and support education institutions as strategic actors in regional and rural development:** not only for their economic impact, but also for their roles in social inclusion, enhancing place attractiveness, and strengthening regional identity.



SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > **Design for proximity:** use local campuses, hybrid and assembly-based teaching so students can study near home.
- > **Continuously monitor the needs and preferences of local youth** to better understand their educational choices and expectations.
- > **Match programmes to local jobs:** set up employer boards, guarantee placements and add short courses/micro-credentials to respond to changing skill needs.
- > **Strengthen collaboration between students and labour market actors:** create more opportunities for engagement through opportunities such as internships, company visits, guest lectures, and mentoring.
- > Maintain a **real campus** with study spaces and services (ideally with extended access) and let **hybrid** delivery to complement – not replace – the on-site experience.
- > Secure **affordable student housing** with municipal partners and local landlords; add transport solutions where housing is tight.
- > Treat **small scale as a strength:** invest in mentoring, student associations and shared events to build community and raise retention.
- > Give campuses **local flexibility** (admissions, scheduling, niche offers) backed by **multi-year funding** that values place relevance, not only scale.
- > **Measure what matters:** track retention, graduate stay rates, inclusion and local skills outcomes, and use these metrics in evaluations to redefine efficiency and success.
- > Develop **multi-institutional campuses** that share infrastructure, pool academic and administrative expertise to stabilise delivery and optimise resource use.



info@rural-pact.eu



www.ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/index_en



Funded by
the European Union